

New year brings new governance to two counties

By Charles Taylor - SENIOR STAFF WRITER - NACO News - 01-29-2011

The Cuyahoga County commission's first act at its meeting on June 6, 1810 was to set the bounty for wolf scalps at "one Dollar each for the year ensuing."

Two hundred years and six months later, the commission's last action — metaphorically — was to turn out the lights on the county's old form of governance and make way for a new one.

Cuyahoga County, Ohio is one of two large, urban counties in the northeast that began 2011 with new forms of government. The county, seated at Cleveland, went from a three-member board of commissioners to an elected county executive and 11-member county council.

Macomb County, Mich. now has its first elected CEO and shrank its board from 26 to 13 members.

The reasons for the change differ, but both counties now face similar challenges and opportunities as they remake government from the ground up.

In Cuyahoga County, population 1.3 million, scandals under the prior structure prompted voters to push for revolutionary change. For Macomb, part of the Detroit metropolitan area, it was an evolutionary step in growing up for this once "sleepy" county that now boasts more than 831,000 residents.

Participants and observers agree that whatever outcomes the voters who approved the new governments had in mind, they'll need to be patient.



Photo courtesy of Macomb County, Mich.

Mark Hackel (r), Macomb County, Mich.'s first county executive, is sworn in by county Clerk Carmella Sabaugh at a ceremony Dec. 31 in Mt. Clemens, the county seat.

"It's going to be a slow process. Just because you've changed doesn't mean everything else is going to change overnight," said Summit County, Ohio Executive Russ Pry. His is the only other Ohio county with a council-executive government. As with Cuyahoga, the change in Summit County followed a government scandal, albeit 30-plus years ago. (In Cuyahoga County, for more than two years, a federal corruption probe has been underway that resulted in 26 charges against former Commissioner Jimmy Dimora, including allegedly taking bribes and kickbacks — he denies the charges — and guilty pleas to 21 crimes by former county Auditor Frank Russo.)

The federal indictments' broad brush has unfairly tarnished the county's reputation, says C. Ellen Connally, a former Cleveland municipal court judge and president of the new Cuyahoga County Council. "Some very good, fine people have been tainted just because they worked here," she said.

But she and her 10 colleagues — none of them holdovers from the previous government — have hit the ground running to try to change perceptions and realities.

"We're working as hard as we can, but it's like a battleship; you don't change the direction in one turn of the wheel," she said.

One recent week, Jan. 12–19, found the new county executive, Ed FitzGerald, making four new appointments to his staff: an inspector general — a new position — acting fiscal officer, deputy chief of justice and communications director.

With so many changes, there's understandable "angst" and "anxiety" among the county's 8,000 employees, said Peter Lawson Jones, the last chair of the County Board. He could have run for the new County Council but chose not to, not wishing to extend his elected service. He was an early critic of the proposed change in governance but thinks it can work.

"When all is said and done, it's not the structure that's determinative of how well the government functions; it's the people who are sitting in the seats," he said. "As long as you have a good executive — thoughtful, visionary executive — you're probably better than having the three-headed hydra that is the Board of County Commissioners."

Cuyahoga County

FitzGerald has pledged to lead an open, transparent government. "My job as county executive, in partnership with the County Council, will be to craft a strategy which builds on our assets and to implement that strategy with a government that is efficient, transparent, honest and effective," he said at his inauguration Jan. 9.

He's the right man for the job, according to Pry, who has given advice to several of the transition teams created to usher in Cuyahoga's new government. "He's a lawyer by profession; he's a former FBI agent," Pry said of FitzGerald. "So I don't think we're going to see a lot of corruption in his administration."

Under the new structure, county departments that formerly reported to the county commissioners — as well as newly created ones — now report to FitzGerald.

After his election last November, FitzGerald also spearheaded creation of a loaned executive program, a public-private partnership to provide technical expertise on various aspects of the transition to the new government. Members included executives from the Cleveland Clinic Foundation and PNC Bank, among others.

The council has given FitzGerald the authority to execute contracts under \$250,000 during the first 90 days of his administration, "just to keep everything running," Connally said.

Thus far, the pace of change has been unrelenting. "It's been very hectic," she added. "We got sworn in on Monday night, the third, and the next morning at 9 o'clock we were doing interviews for candidates for the Board of Revision," a panel that hears property tax assessment challenges that already has a backlog of cases.

Under the new government, council members each represent a single district, versus running countywide as the previous three commissioners did. This could give rise to more parochialism and ward politics. But Connally says her members are staying focused on the big picture while also attending to the needs of their constituents.

Macomb County

Growth and development are among the factors that led Macomb voters to approve a new charter in November 2009. Before the change, only three of the state's 88 counties had home-rule governments: Oakland and Wayne counties, also in the Detroit area, and Bay County.

Macomb County residents voted in favor of creating a charter commission on May 6, 2008. Commissioners were elected the following November and began drafting the charter one month later. Gov. Jennifer Granholm subsequently approved the charter, and it was placed on the November 2009 ballot, where it passed 60 percent to 40 percent.

"I think that the citizens of Macomb County felt like they needed to move in that direction in order to be more progressive," said Tim McGuire, executive director of the Michigan Association of Counties.

The Detroit-area counties, along with the Motor City, comprise what some Michiganders call the Big Four. The jurisdictions account for about 40 percent (4 million) of the state's 10 million residents. But for all its size, Macomb was the region's "red-headed step-child," according to Brooks Patterson, Oakland's long-time county executive.

And he said the county's former structure could be a hindrance when the Big Four were acting in the interest of the region, or to Macomb's benefit, for that matter. Oakland and Wayne, and Detroit with its strong mayor, could act more decisively — having a single point person at the table during discussions and negotiations. "In the past Macomb always had to drop out and come back in six weeks after they had a vote of the board," Patterson said.

Now, “It’s apples to apples as we begin to map out programs,” he added. “You have a person who’s going to step up, and frankly, the buck stops at his desk.”

Behind that desk sits Mark Hackel. The new county executive was elected last November, after serving as the county’s sheriff for a decade.

“We’re now going to be an equal partner with an equal voice,” he said. “With that, we’re also looking for an equal share.”

As with FitzGerald in Cuyahoga, Hackel is spending a lot of time “making sure “I’m finding the right staff — people that are business professionals who understand how to organize and design a business.”

The business in this case isn’t a manufacturing operation; its task will be the business of governing.

Preamble to the Cuyahoga County Charter

We, the people of Cuyahoga County, Ohio, desire a reformed County Government to significantly improve the County’s economic competitiveness. With it, the taxpayers of Cuyahoga County can have: (1) focused, effective and accountable leadership; (2) job creation and economic growth as a fundamental government purpose, thereby helping the County do a better job of creating and retaining jobs and ensuring necessary and essential health and human services; (3) collaborative leadership with Cleveland, suburbs and others within the public and private sectors; (4) an improved focus on equity for all our communities and citizens; (5) long-term regional and global competitiveness; and (6) significant taxpayer savings by streamlining and eliminating unnecessary elected offices.

Desiring to secure for ourselves and for our successors the benefits of self-determination as to local matters that are afforded by the assumption of home rule powers for this County and the establishment of a county government that provides for the separation of administrative and legislative powers and for a more representative and accountable form of governance for this County, We, the people, adopt this Charter of Cuyahoga County.

The charter, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://charter.cuyahogacounty.us/en-US/charter.aspx>.

For Macomb County’s home rule charter, go to
www.macombcountymi.gov/clerksoffice/charter/charter-final.pdf.